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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/SINGH
STATE FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/FO:ATACHCO

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TAGS: [LE](#) [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: BORDER CLASH OVER IED REMOVAL

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) According to the Embassy's contacts in Lebanon, there is a tense quiet across the shared border after last night's exchange of fire between Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Israeli Defense Force (IDF) units. The United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) preliminary report of the incident indicates that the LAF initiated the hostile exchange when an IDF bulldozer and engineering team crossed the Technical Fence to clear mines near the border village of Maroun al-Ras. UNIFIL is still trying to determine whether the IDF bulldozer actually ever crossed the Blue Line, but the initial report is that bulldozer had not crossed the border when the shooting began. It is still not clear what specific IDF action triggered the LAF to start firing, nor whether they fired in the air or at the IDF, though UNIFIL believes that it was the forward movement of the IDF past the technical fence area. UNIFIL also indicated that the timing of the IDF operation at night increased the tension and ambiguity of the situation leading to the initial hostile action by the LAF. End Summary.

UNIFIL TRIED TO PREVENT THE INCIDENT

2.(C) Noticing at 2000 on February 7 that IDF units were preparing to perform IED clearance, UNIFIL approached IDF representatives, questioned the timing, and advised to postpone the operation until daylight hours the following day. UNIFIL expressed its concern that since the action would be conducted in the dark near the Blue Line, it would be unclear to all parties whether the Israelis had crossed the line. UNIFIL sources told us that they felt this would produce a situation in which misinterpretation of motives could lead to a cross-border incident. UNIFIL then proposed a tripartite meeting on Thursday to have both sides agree on mutual de-mining operations which could be carried out during the daylight hours. After the contact, IDF representatives stated that they intended to remain on their side of the Blue Line and declined to change the time. It is worth noting that the Israeli Technical Fence runs south of the Blue Line, typically between 50 and 500 meters. The Blue Line (which, for lack of an agreed and demarcated international border, is treated as the border) is only sparsely marked on the ground. When the Israelis carry out operations north of the Fence, many Lebanese erroneously believe that they have violated

Lebanese territory. Although the LAF should be aware of this distinction, it is not impossible that some soldiers or units could make the same mistake, UNIFIL believes.

A QUESTION ON LAF CASUALTIES

13. (C) According to UNIFIL, three LAF soldiers were injured when their M-113 armored personnel carrier was hit by IDF fire. UNIFIL did not indicate the extent of the LAF injuries (most likely minor based on UNIFIL report). This is in contrast to a LAF statement that no LAF troops were injured in the incident. No Israeli casualties have been reported by the IDF.

UNIFIL PUSHING FOR TRIPARTITE MEETING

14. (C) After the incident, UNIFIL has been pushing both the LAF and IDF to have a tripartite meeting in the next two days to help lower the tension level and to discuss ways of preventing similar events from happening again. UNIFIL stated that there had not been a tripartite meeting since mid-December 2006. The lack of communication between the LAF and IDF was probably one of the main contributors to the hostile exchange between the two sides. UNIFIL has indicated that LAF has indicated that it needs authorization from the government before it can engage in the tripartite meeting, which it seems reluctant to do at this time.

MURR QUESTIONS ISRAELI BORDER ACTIONS

15. (C) When the Ambassador called Defense Minister Elias Murr

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last night to urge him to get the LAF to stop its engagement, Murr agreed but expressed frustration that the Israelis would choose to work at night in a sensitive area north of the technical fence where "misunderstandings" would happen easily. "What was their hurry?" Murr asked; "why couldn't this has been done with more coordination? Why couldn't they wait until daylight?" Murr said that he assumed the Israeli motivation was in part "macho," given the appointment of a new Chief of Staff. Murr took the point that the LAF puts itself and Lebanon in real danger by firing across the Blue Line in clear violation of UNSCR 1701 and international norms.

COMMENT

16. (C) This was an extremely dangerous situation that could have easily spun out of control. While the Lebanese remain suspicious and paranoid about why the Israelis would choose nighttime in a sensitive border area to search for IEDs, there was no excuse for LAF fire. The LAF action was reckless and a clear violation of international law. We have raised strong objections to both Murr and PM Siniora. We will use this example to press the GOL to give blanket approval for tripartite IDF-UNIFIL-LAF coordination. Predictably, the Lebanese press today was full of praise for LAF action. The IDF seems to have provided the LAF a pretext by which to restore some of the reputation lost two weeks ago, when the LAF responded to the 1/23 demonstrators with passivity.

FELTMAN